

Mr. Smith
Mr. Kent

File

28 August 1963



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MEMORANDUM FOR THE ACTING DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

SUBJECT: Alternatives to the Ngo Family Regime in South Vietnam

In response to your request, I have drafted the attached memorandum for your information and consideration. The assumptions on which this memorandum is based are, in effect, the principal conclusions of my 26 August paper, "Present Prospects for South Vietnam."

This paper written at Gen Carter's request after he had talked to Carver. Copies given only to Carter, Shelton, Cooper, [redacted], Bill Corby - But Carter gave 2 to Mac Bundy, who (I think) gave one to the Pres.

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This paper has been replaced, I believe, by another to be ready 3 Sept & written with aid of DD/P



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28 August 1963

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: ALTERNATIVES TO THE NGO FAMILY REGIME IN SOUTH VIETNAM

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The argument of this memorandum rests on three assumptions:

- (i) Because of its actions of 21 August and their aftermath no member of the Ngo family can now provide the kind of unifying national leadership necessary to win the counterinsurgency struggle and reduce the Viet Cong threat to manageable proportions.

- (ii) The best hope for the preservation of US interests and attainment of US objectives in South Vietnam lies in the possibility of an early coup d'etat by anti-Communist nationalists with sufficient military support to obviate prolonged civil war.

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(iii) To protect US interest, we would be far better advised to determine the kind of government we would like to see installed and then work toward that objective rather than leave matters to chance or simply wait on the sidelines for a move by some combination of the Ngo family's opponents.

2. Although we cannot discount the possibility of a more or less spontaneous popular uprising in Saigon of sufficient magnitude to topple the present government, if the Ngo family is to be ousted in the near future it will probably have to be deposed by a military coup. Furthermore, US interests and objectives would be much better served by a military coup in which a few identifiable and reachable individuals were capable of generally controlling the situation. A popular uprising or, for that matter an isolated assassination of Diem and Nhu (i.e., one which was not the first step in an organized coup plan) would produce the kind of chaos from which only the Communist would be likely to benefit.

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3. The officers leading any military coup might well wish to install themselves as a military junta and might not be willing to share political power with civilians, especially civilians who had shared none of the risks involved. However, I believe overall US objectives in South Vietnam are more likely to be attained by a predominantly civilian government with some military participation (and, of course, military support) than by a junta or government with a predominantly military cast. This memorandum attempts to sketch the outlines of the kind of government I think could foster US objectives, suggest how the military support necessary to install it might be obtained, and give a general assessment of the risks involved.

II. SUGGESTED ALTERNATIVES TO THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT OF VIETNAM

General Requirements:

4. US interests require a cooperative anti-Communist government in Saigon which is politically viable, can successfully prosecute the war against the Viet Cong, and is capable of making progress toward the common long range objectives of the US and free Vietnam.

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5. Precluded Personalities. US interests obviously require the exclusion from political power of Communists or persons strongly inclined to neutralism. For example, the US should have nothing to do with ex-Premier Tran van Huu, who has strong neutralist inclinations and may well be working for the French to boot. The requirements outlined above, however, also preclude a number of persons who are not Communist or neutralist. On grounds of present political viability, we should eliminate from consideration anyone too closely identified in the Vietnamese public's eye with the practices and policies of the Diem regime -- e. g., Assistant Minister of Defense and Presidency Secretary Nguyen dinh Thuan. For a variety of reasons we should actively oppose giving any political authority to Dr. Tran kim Tuyen, the former director of SEPES (the GVN's security and intelligence service). We should also attempt to prevent Dr. Pham Quang Dan from attaining any position of importance. Dan is perhaps the best known opposition figure in South Vietnam, but I consider him a demagogue and believe a government in which he had an influential voice would probably prove little if any better than the present regime.

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6. Basic Structure. The basic structure of the present government -- i.e., a strong executive branch with a largely ornamental legislature -- is probably the one best suited to winning the war and meeting South Vietnam's present political needs, though a somewhat more independent judiciary might produce a better domestic and international image. One structural change, however, should be seriously considered. US interests require that Diem's successor be capable of serving as a focal point for national unity and the living symbol of that unity. They also require that Diem's successor be capable of running a war and managing South Vietnam's progress toward independent nationhood. In light of recent events, the symbol of national unity almost has to be a southerner (i.e., a person from what used to be called Cochinchina) and a Buddhist; but it is a fact of Vietnamese life that dynamic, able administrators usually come from the center or the north. The characteristics and qualifications necessary for fulfilling both of these functions are not likely to be found in one individual. Therefore, I recommend that we not look for a single "successor" to Diem but instead envisage a government with a more or less titular chief of state performing the symbolic function and a premier or prime minister directing the actual management of national affairs.

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7. Possible Chiefs of State. For reasons of practical politics, it may be necessary for the chief of state to be a military officer. Unfortunately, the most promising such candidate -- Lt. Gen. Le van Ty -- is now dying of cancer. If the post has to be filled by a serving officer, I would recommend Major General Duong van Minh since both within and without the army he probably commands more respect than any other single military figure. Gen. Minh's considerable military talents, however, would be largely wasted in such a position and he would be much more useful to Vietnam as Chief of the Joint General Staff or, possibly, Minister of Defense. If the post can be filled by a civilian, the following four persons merit serious consideration:

a. Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho. Tho might provide a military coup with a useful figleaf of constitutional legality, particularly in Ngo dinh Nhu should more or less effectively depose his brother before a coup could be mounted. Also he is both a southerner and a Buddhist, well known within South Vietnam and abroad. However, Tho may be too compromised by the role he has been forced to play in the Buddhist affair and by his continued public

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silence with regard to recent events. He would become a much more attractive possibility if he could bring himself (or be persuaded) to make some overt gesture of protest at recent government action against the Buddhists and the students.

b. Vu van Mau. Mau's courageous and dramatic actions of resigning his post as Foreign Minister in protest at the events of August 21, shaving his head to signalize his sympathy with the Buddhists' plight, and addressing a public rally of students on August 24 make him a prime candidate. Also, he is quite well known, has some international stature, and works very well with the US. His familiarity with current administrative problems and counterinsurgency programs could be most useful in assuring a continuity of constructive effort between the old and a new regime. All factors considered, Mau is probably the best available choice.

c. Mai Tho Truyen. Head of the Vietnamese Buddhist Studies Association and vice-president of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, Truyen is the leading lay Buddhist in South Vietnam. As such he could play a very

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valuable role in healing the wounds of recent events. He is considered a moderate and respected leader among his co-religionists, though he has played a relatively minor role in the current protest movement. He is strongly anti-Communist and according to an American professor who knows him well, thinks very highly of the United States.

d. Tran van Lam. Now Ambassador to New Zealand and Australia, Lam was formerly President of the National Assembly. To a degree, Lam's present post is one of honorable exile. An easygoing, affable Southerner, Lam is the type of person with whom many Vietnamese could identify and affectionately view as a favorite uncle. Dynamic he is not, but he could make a very popular chief of state.

8. Possible Premiers. Again, it may be necessary to give this post to a military man. If so, I would recommend Brigadier General Le van Kim as the one best qualified. Gen. Kim is one of the most competent officers in the Vietnamese army and one of the few with the breadth of background necessary for an essentially political position.

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(Kim, incidentally, is the man the paratroopers who staged the 1960 coup attempt had intended to install as President. He was witting of the paratroopers' plans but, being in Delat, played no role in the coup itself.) He has twice visited the United States and gets along extremely well with Americans. However, Gen. Kim could probably be more useful to his country in a military capacity and I personally believe it would be better if the premier were a civilian. There are at least three civilians worthy of very serious consideration:

a. Tran Trung Dung. From 1955 until 1960, Dung was Assistant Secretary of State for National Defense (i.e., actually defense minister, though Diem technically held the portfolio). He eventually resigned in frustration over Diem and Nhu's policies. A prime factor leading to his resignation was his inability to keep the Place from meddling in military affairs in a way that diminished the army's effectiveness. His continuing though not always successful effort to get officers promoted on merit and assigned to posts commensurate with their abilities won him a great deal of respect among the abler elements of the military

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establishment. An ardent nationalist, Dung had a long record of anti-French activities and has always been extremely anti-Communist. Intelligent, hard-working and ambitious, Dung impressed many American observers with his quick grasp of complex problems and his ability to implement decisions with a minimum of administrative delay. He is very pro-US and was among the earliest advocates of increased use of American advisors in the Vietnamese armed forces. Though a devout Catholic from North Vietnam, Dung is very alive to political reality. For example, he has described Mme. Nhu's Family Bill as "a stupid attempt to impose Roman Catholic morality on a Buddhist population". Dung would work well with the army and the US and would probably have a far surer political touch than Diem.

b. Hoang co Thuy. Thuy was the only civilian in the inner circle of the group which planned and staged the November 1960 coup attempt. Had the coup been successful, Thuy would have been de facto premier of the new regime. During the coup attempt itself, Thuy made every effort to keep US officials posted on the

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paratroopers' activities and intentions, and generally behaved in an extremely responsible fashion. His influence was probably the most important single factor in deferring the rebels from shelling the Palace or launching a futile last-ditch fight in the heart of Saigon once the fortunes of war had turned against them. A Buddhist from North Vietnam and an ardent nationalist, Thuy served briefly with the Viet Minh, but left as soon as he saw that the movement was effectively controlled by the Communists, whom he despised and who he felt were endeavoring to substitute one form of colonialism for another. Thuy was an effective supporter of Diem in the early days of the present regime. At the Revolutionary Assembly session of 29 April 1955, it was he who wrote and formally proposed the motion that Bao Dai be deposed as chief of state in favor of Diem. He was also a member of the committee which drafted South Vietnam's present constitution. He soon became convinced, however, that Diem was bent on establishing a family dictatorship which could never defeat the Communists and went into the ranks of the opposition. One of Saigon's leading lawyers, he displayed considerable courage in defending non-Communist

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oppositionists prosecuted for political reasons by the Diem regime and considerable skill in winning many of them acquittals or far lighter sentences than would have been anticipated. His administrative talents are an unknown quantity, but most of the programs and policies he prepared for implementation upon the rebels' victory were sound and constructive. He is extremely pro-American and would work very closely with US officials. He is now living quietly in Switzerland and has scrupulously avoided becoming involved in the hothouse cabals of emigre political circles. (Exile, however, is not necessarily a bar to political office, for Diem was called to the Premiership from a Belgian monastery.) Though Thuy has no organized following, he does have an excellent reputation as an anti-Communist and anti-Diem nationalist and would probably make a very good premier.

c. Tran quoc Buu. Buu is the head of South Vietnam's largest, most effective labor union confederation (the CVTC) and is a person of considerable stature in free world labor circles. By virtue of his position, he has the largest organized mass following of any person

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in South Vietnam (if one discounts or disregards Ngo dinh Nhu's Republican Youth). Buu was one of the founders of the Can Lao Party and played a key role in bringing Diem to power. Since 1957, however, he has grown progressively more disenchanted with the Ngo family. He has always stayed just close enough to Diem and Nhu to protect CVTC and his position in it, but has also played as independent a role as possible under the circumstances. Buu is a forceful, dynamic organizer with proven leadership abilities. He too is extremely pro-American and would work most cooperatively with US officials.

9. Possible Military Participants: Any government installed by military coup d'etat and initially dependent for its survival on strong military support will have to reserve at least some posts of prestige and authority for its indispensable backers. In the present situation, a serving officer should probably be named Minister of Defense. The best candidate for that position would appear to be Gen. Le van Kim, Gen. Duong van Minh is another obvious choice but he would probably be even more effective as Chief of the Joint General Staff. Gen. Tran van Minh, though perhaps less able than the other two mentioned, would function effectively as a

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Deputy Defense Minister or in a post analagous to that now titled Secretary of State at the Presidency.

10. Cabinet Candidates. With the exception of Tran van Lam and Mai Tho Truyen, all of the persons discussed above are eminently qualified for a senior cabinet post if not chosen for the position with reference to which they were intially mentioned. (Lam would be much more useful as a symbolic figurehead than a minister with administrative responsibilities. Truyen's most useful known quantity is his religious prominence, though if a new government were to create a Ministry of Religious Affairs -- which might be a very wise move -- he would be the logical candidate for Minister.) Vu van Mau has been an admirable Foreign Minister and the diplomatic problems involved in the transition from one regime to another would be greatly facilitated if he were restored to that post. Nguyen ngoc Tho has been a good Secretary of State for Economic Affairs, though there might be better persons for that particular slot. Tran quoc Buu is an obvious candidate for Minister of Labor. Both Tran trung Dung and Hoang co Thuy would strengthen any cabinet of which they were members.

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11. In addition to the persons already mentioned, there are a number of politically viable and capable anti-Communist nationalists who perhaps might not merit consideration for Chief of state or premier, but could make a most useful contribution at the cabinet level. I have made no effort to match individual with position, but the following are illustrative examples:

a. Pham Khac Suu. An outstanding agronomist and Diem's first Minister of Agriculture, Suu is one of the most responsible and certainly one of the most respected members of the opposition. He was one of the two real oppositionists (Pham quang Dan was the other) who won seats (which neither was allowed to take) in the 1959 National Assembly elections. Suu could not have won if many of the troops rotated through the polls to vote against him had not actually voted for him instead. Suu is renowned for his personal and moral courage and would lend prestige to any government in which he was included. He is now in jail for alleged participation in the 1960 coup plot -- a charge of which he is not guilty.

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b. Dr. Pham Huy Quat. Dr. Quat is a Dai Viet. (One of the two old-line nationalist parties. It is now completely fractionalized but its name still has a certain aura in Vietnam.) In the post World War II period he served under Bao Dai as Minister of Defense and Minister of Education. In 1955, there were many in both Saigon and Washington who considered him a preferable alternative to Diem.

c. Dinh Trinh Chinh. Chinh is a brilliant and forceful young lawyer with considerable political flair. He is very highly regarded in opposition circles but has managed to keep the full extent of his disaffection concealed from the present regime, by which he has been used for several delicate assignments. He speaks excellent English and is quite pro-American. He would perform admirably the functions now discharged by Nguyen dinh Thuan as Secretary of State at the Presidency. He also could probably do an effective job in organizing the new regime's intelligence and security service.

d. Nguyen Tran. A Catholic from Central Vietnam, Tran did such a good job as a province chief that the

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present regime removed him from his post as a potential political threat. Tran has spent a considerable amount of time in the US but recently returned to Vietnam to try to organize a coup group among his Catholic supporters. We doubt if he will be successful in this endeavor, but he is certainly worthy of cabinet consideration. Also, the new regime must avoid the mistakes of the old and it should definitely include a few prominent Catholics in its composition.

e. Nguyen van Can. Can is a lawyer, scholar and writer with a considerable academic and literary reputation. An intensely devout but nonetheless liberal Catholic, he is very prominent in lay Catholic organizations and on very close terms with most of the South Vietnamese hierarchy. A deputy and leader of the opposition bloc in the first National Assembly, he was considered too independent by the GVN to be allowed to regain his seat in the 1959 elections and by government manipulation of the ballot rolls was prevented from doing so. Despite his opposition sentiments, he now holds a post in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Can is a great admirer of

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the United States. His abilities and his prominence in Catholic circles would both make him useful to a new government.

f. Vu van Thai. A brilliant economist, Thai was the Director of Budget and Foreign Aid until August 1961, when he resigned in disgust at the policies and practices of the present regime. Many Americans considered him the GVN's most competent official. He is now serving as a UN adviser in Africa, but could do much more for Vietnam by resuming his former position.

g. Nguyen Huu Hanh. A young but very able banker highly thought of in international financial circles, Hanh was deputy head of the National Bank of Vietnam and Director of the GVN-owned Credit Commercial before he, like Vu van Thai, resigned in disgust. He would probably be the best available candidate for Minister of Finance.

h. Nguyen Thai. Thai was Director General of the GVN's Vietnam Press Agency until he came to the US in 1961 to complete his Ph.D. and become Vietnam's first Nieman Fellow at Harvard. While in the US, however, he

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has completed and published a critical study of the Diem regime which has effectively precluded his returning to Vietnam. Thai would make an excellent Director of Information, or Minister if that directorate is made (as it should be) cabinet-level ministry.

i. If, as would probably be wise, some nod is to be made to exile circles, a cabinet might include either Nguyen ton Hoan or Dr. Pham Huy Co, both now based in Paris. Hoan, the leader of the southern faction of the Dai Viet Party, is probably the more competent of the two. Co acts more or less as the agent of Dr. Pham quang Dan. The same cabinet would not be big enough for both of them, but each has a reputation and some following that a new government could put to good use.

j. Vu quoc Thuc. A respected economist and legal scholar, Thuc is now Dean of the Saigon University Law Faculty. Though a man of integrity he is somewhat timorous and reluctant to make too public his private opposition to many aspects of the present regime. His abilities and basic character are such, however, that he would make a good Minister of Justice. The current student riots make his present role a delicate one, but if he can handle it in a fashion that wins student admiration he would acquire considerable prestige that a new government could use. Another potential Minister of Justice is.

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Bui Thong Huan, ex-Dean of the Hue Law School, who is probably not so good a legal technician as Thuc but who has resigned in protest against recent actions of the present regime (specifically the politically inspired ouster of Hue University's popular Rector) and hence would presently be more politically attractive than Thuc to a successor government.

k. Dr. Pham Bieu Tam, ex-Dean of Saigon University Medical Faculty, and Dr. Bui. Thong Huan, ex-Dean of the Medical Faculty in Hue, have both recently recently resigned their posts in gestures of political protests and thereby made themselves potential candidates for Minister of Health in a new government.

11. I believe a government composed of the individuals discussed above would be viable, effective, and capable of furthering the common interests of the US and free Vietnam. This is no definitnate list of possible candidates and is not offered as such. It is submitted partly to dispel the myth that there is "no alternative" to the present regime and primarily as a suggestion that might be of some use in concrete planning.

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III. A SUGGESTED ACTION PLAN

12. The Generals. A military coup d'etat responsive to US interests and objectives -- not the least of which is minimizing the risk of prolonged civil war -- will require the cooperation of at least a few key Vietnamese generals. Furthermore, Vietnamese generals would be in a much better position than American officials to do the practical, detailed planning required and make the vital selection of the actual units to be employed. The number of generals contacted must obviously be held to an irreducible minimum. The criteria to be employed in selection would appear to be willingness to move against the present regime, military competence, courage, trustworthiness (from our point of view), and favorable disposition towards the US. On the basis of these criteria, the most promising and potentially useful officers would appear to be Gen. Nguyen-Khanh, Gen. Duong van Minh, Gen Tran van Minh, and Gen. Le van Kim.

a. Gen. Khanh (II Corps Area commander), with apparent sincerity, has virtually asked the US to back him in a coup

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plot which he has intimated is already being developed. Khanh has also indicated that he sees the army's role as being limited to toppling the Ngo family before the family can turn Vietnam over to the Communists. He would appear to be willing to seek US advice on the structure and composition of a successor government. We would probably be well advised to take the risky gamble that Khanh is telling the truth.

b. Gen. Tran van Minh is an officer in whose reliability we can have considerable confidence and who can probably be used in helping us weigh the reliability of others.

c. Gen. Duong van Minh seems to be the officer with the greatest personal prestige in the army and also appears to be upset by the Ngo family's recent moves, perhaps enough to act in the way he has previously talked. A coup which Duong van Minh backed would probably attract much more spontaneous military support once it was launched than one to which he was neutral or, especially, one which he actively opposed. For these reasons, plus the fact that he could play any of several key roles in a successor government, he should be among those contacted.

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d. Gen Le van Kim is indicated for contact because of his ability, the fact that he is reliably reported irate at the regime for having "tricked" the army, and the fact that he too will be needed in a successor government.

13. There are also two other Generals to whom we might want to turn: Brig. Gen. Le van Nghiem and Brig. Gen. Tran Thien Khiem. The former, a Buddhist, was recently removed from command of I Corps Area so that Gen. Tri could execute Nhu's plan of sacking the pagodas in Central Vietnam. His present disaffection makes him a tempting target, but at the moment he is on the shelf and could not offer much concrete assistance. Gen. Khiem poses a more complex problem: As Chief of Staff of the Joint General Staff, he is most strategically placed, but his loyalties are almost impossible to determine. He often talks a dissident line, but always seems to act in a manner consonant with the wishes of the regime. Though Gen. Khanh is apparently willing to vouch for his willingness to participate in a coup, I think he should be approached only with the greatest caution, if at all.

14. The Key Units. Unfortunately, the generals most likely to meet our criteria are the ones least likely to be given command

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of actual troops in the Saigon area. Consequently, we must look to key unit commanders who could undertake the specific action required. Though units to be employed and their respective commanders should probably be selected by the generals we turn to, there are a few units commanders on which our own eyes might also be fixed. The most important of these is Col. Cao van Vien, Commander of the Airborne Brigade and until recently, regarded (by us) as the only really loyal officer in the brigade. Col Vien, however, has told an American officer that he is distressed by the imposition of martial law and the sack of the pagodas and that he is anxious not to lose the now existing rapport between his brigade and the Saigon populace. Furthermore, Col. Vien is independently reported to have been engaged in coup plotting prior to the August 21 raids in conjunction with Lt. Col Nguyen van Thien, Commander of the Armor Brigade, and Col. Le Nguyen Khang, Commander of the Marines -- two other officers on whom we should keep a close watch. Also, most senior officers of the Air Force seem bitter critics of the regime and the Air Force could play a really vital role in demolishing the palace and in keeping layalist troops from coming to the Ngo family's aid.

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15. Procedure. Once we have determined whom to contact among the military, we should make overtures to the persons selected and if they prove receptive, engage in serious joint planning with a view toward mounting a coup at the earliest practicable date. If we enter into this planning and negotiation process with a fairly clear idea in our own minds as to the government we would like to see emerge from the coups, we will be in a much better position to plan and negotiate effectively -- and in a much better position to achieve a desired result.

16. The US Role. Direct US participation in a coup attempt is to be precluded by obvious political factors. Nevertheless, we may be able to render not only advice and technical assistance but also exert some discreet leverage to facilitate the work of our allies and hinder the rescue efforts of the family's supporters. We could, for example, let the coup plotters use our communications system once they were moving and simultaneously jam (on a non attributable basis) the transmitters and receivers of loyalists forces.

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IV. AN ASSESSMENT OF RISKS

17. Mounting such an operation as proposed in this memorandum in total secrecy, particularly in Vietnam, may prove impossible. It would be extremely embarrassing for us to be caught in the act, but if we are, there is really very little that the GVN can do -- certainly very little that it is not likely to do anyway. We might lose face in the rest of the free world for being caught, but our overall political position and image would not suffer severely. Neither our allies nor the neutrals are very likely to leap to the Ngo family's defense. The Communists are going to claim that any non-Communist successor government to Diem is our installed puppet, whether or not we have a hand in its installation.

18. There is, however, one serious contingency that must be prepared for. Should there be a coup -- whether or not we are behind it -- and should such a coup look as if it were succeeding, Ngo dinh Nhu is perfectly capable of ordering his forces to massacre every American they can reach.

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19. The risks involved in the operation this memorandum proposes are extreme. There are many ways in which the coup attempt might fail. Whether it succeeds or fails, much blood could be spilled. Even if the coup itself should be successful, we have no advance guarantee that a new government -- even one of our own devising -- would necessarily prove more effective than the present regime.

20. On balance, however, the risks of not attempting such a project are even greater than those involved in trying it. With the Ngo family regime in power, there is virtually no chance of achieving the objectives of our presence in South Vietnam. Our strategic and political stake in the country is so great and our prestige so heavily invested in the success of its counterinsurgency effort that we can ill afford a defeat. The longer the Ngo family remains in power, the greater becomes the danger of chaos and an upsurge of neutralist sentiment which would make a Communist victory virtually inevitable. There is now really little else we can do other than take a gamble which may fail but in which lies our only reasonable hope of eventual success.

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